

RIDGE Center Research Grants for Fiscal Year 2010

RIDGE Center for National Studies at the Institute for Research on Poverty

Food Security, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and Food Access

Alessandro Bonanno, Pennsylvania State University

Analysis of the factors that enable participation in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)—formerly known as the Food Stamp Program—to reduce food insecurity has been so far neglected. Food-insecure households joining SNAP will be better off if they have access to a source of food (preferably low-priced). As food access is exogenous for low-income individuals (they have limited resources and, therefore, limited mobility), the characteristics of the food environment surrounding the individuals becomes a key factor in the effectiveness of the policy. The objective of this study is to analyze the role of food access in SNAP's ability to mitigate food insecurity. In particular, the study will consider both access to traditional food retailers (grocery stores and specialty food stores) and to a low-priced nontraditional alternative, Wal-Mart Supercenters.

Explaining the Increase in SNAP Caseloads During the Recovery of 2003–07

Robert J. LaLonde and Janna E. Johnson, University of Chicago

The recent recession has seen an increase of over 30 percent in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) caseloads. The period following the 2001 recession, however, also saw an increase in SNAP caseloads, the first time in program history that caseloads rose during a period of economic recovery. This study will attempt to explain this phenomenon by decomposing caseload changes into their basic mechanical components: changes in the number of eligibles, participation rates among the eligibles, and participation spell length. We will then determine the underlying causes of these mechanical movements to specify more precisely than has previously been done the relationship between macroeconomic conditions, policy changes, and SNAP caseloads.

Bridging the Gap: Do Farmers Markets Help Alleviate Impacts of Food Deserts?

Vicki A. McCracken, Washington State University

Existing research on food deserts—areas with limited access to affordable and nutritious food—and community food security lacks significant empirical, spatially relevant support for developing a sound understanding of the variation in effectiveness of Federal food assistance programs in relation to local food systems. This proposed research will begin to fill this void by first establishing the traditionally conceived food desert estimation for Washington State by using grocery store location and census demographic data. We will expand the research by using farmers’ markets and a behaviorally appropriate measure of travel characteristics to such markets. Following these estimations, we will move beyond the typical food desert analysis by operationalizing them via an assessment of the variation in redemption rates and use of Federal food assistance programs (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and Senior Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program (FMNP)). SNAP data will be obtained from the 20 pilot markets located in Washington. Complete WIC and Senior FMNP data for 2009 has been obtained from all approved farmers’ markets.

Estimating the Impact of SNAP on the Poverty Rate by Using a National Academy of Sciences-Style Poverty Measure for New York City

Mark Levitan and Daniel Scheer, New York City Center for Economic Opportunity

The New York City Center for Economic Opportunity (CEO) developed an alternative poverty measure for New York City based on the National Academy of Sciences’ (NAS) recommendations. The creation of an alternative method for measuring poverty, particularly one that accounts for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, is well-timed. Over the course of the current recession, SNAP has become an increasingly significant element of the social safety net. As a result, researchers and policymakers have become acutely interested in understanding the degree to which increased SNAP participation has ameliorated the impact of the recent economic downturn on families vulnerable to poverty. An NAS-style poverty measure is well-suited to this task.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and Homeowner Outcomes: Can Food Assistance Prevent Mortgage Delinquency and Foreclosure?

Maximilian Schmeiser, Assistant Professor, Department of Consumer Science, and IRP Affiliate

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)—formerly known as the Food Stamp Program—is the largest in-kind benefit provided to low-income families in the United States. In fiscal year 2009, SNAP served 33.7 million low-income people and provided total benefits worth over \$50 billion. From the start of the recession in December 2007 to December 2009, the number of SNAP recipients increased from 27.6 million to 39.0 million. SNAP has become one of the primary fiscal stabilizers during the current economic crisis, providing an average of \$293 per month to recipient households. For recently unemployed workers receiving a U.S. average weekly unemployment benefit of \$310, SNAP benefits of \$293 per month represent a significant supplement to their income. As housing costs represent the largest single household expenditure, the additional monthly SNAP benefit may be the difference between families making their mortgage payments or not.

This study examines the effect of participation in SNAP on a family’s ability to meet its mortgage obligations and avoid foreclosure. To address the potential endogeneity between the decision to participate in SNAP and a borrower’s ability to make his or her mortgage payments and avoid foreclosure, we employ several different estimation strategies. These strategies include (1) the use of family fixed effects to eliminate any time-invariant unobserved heterogeneity, and (2) an instrumental-variables approach that exploits exogenous cross-State variation in SNAP eligibility requirements and program characteristics to predict participation in SNAP.

RIDGE Center for Targeted Studies at the Southern Rural Development Center

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and Food Insecurity Dynamics in the Rural South

Bradford F. Mills, Virginia Tech University, and Elton Mykerezi, University of Minnesota

The rural South shows persistently higher rates of poverty, higher levels of food insecurity, and greater dependence on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)—formerly known as the Food Stamp Program—than the Nation as a whole. The proposed research will increase food assistance researchers’ and policymakers’ understanding of the dynamics of SNAP contributions to household food security in the rural South. The research will focus on documenting household exposure to short-term (monthly) economic shocks like job loss, monthly SNAP participation, and monthly food insecurity by using panel data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics for the period 1998-2002. Household food security status and SNAP participation will be observed for 36 months within the period. This process will generate a relatively large sample for the rural South, with at least 3,528 observations of household exposure to food insecurity and 5,400 observations of household participation in the SNAP.

Structural relationships between economic shocks, SNAP participation, and food insecurity will be estimated for the rural South and for the Nation for comparison. Estimated monthly relationships will also be compared with those generated from the more traditional approach of using annual rather than monthly data on shocks, SNAP participation, and food security. Results will be distilled to generate potentially distinct food assistance policy and program design recommendations for mitigating food insecurity arising from the short-term economic shocks and chronic poverty found at disproportionate levels in the rural South.

Direct and Comprehensive Measure of Child Food Security: Reliability, Accuracy, and Concordance With Parental Report

Maryah Stella Fram, University of South Carolina, and Edward A. Frongillo, Jr., University of South Carolina

Household food insecurity is associated with deficits in children’s physical, psychosocial, and educational development. Ameliorating these deficits depends on practitioners’ ability to accurately and reliably

assess what children experience within food-insecure households. Currently, the assessment of child food insecurity relies on parental reports of child experiences. This approach is problematic because parents cannot fully know what their children experience. For instance, in our previous qualitative research, interviews with South Carolina children in food-insecure households revealed that children have unique worries, stresses, discomforts, and food management strategies. Parents were often unaware of how their children felt or what they did to try to make food last. The limitations of parental proxy measurement are well known, and have led to the development and validation of child-report measures of such concepts as quality of life, pain, and exposure to violence by a parent's intimate partner. We propose to develop, validate, and field test a new child-report survey measure of child food insecurity. This measure will be useful to researchers, policymakers, and practitioners who are involved in efforts to reduce child hunger and to improve child health and development. We also propose to use this measure to examine the concordance of parent versus child reports of child food insecurity among a diverse sample of children and parents in South Carolina. This research will shed new light on how children versus parents experience and manage food insecurity, and on the extent to which current parent-report estimates of child food insecurity may need to be revisited.

The Influence of Community Retail Food Environment on Household Food Access, Food Choice, and Dietary Intake of Mexican-American Children of Colonias Along the South Texas Border With Mexico

Joseph R. Sharkey and Wesley R. Dean, Texas A&M Health Science Center

Among children ages 6-11, the prevalence for overweight and obesity is high among Mexican-American children (42.8 percent). Nutritional disparities faced by Mexican-American children in low-income households that rely on food assistance programs in limited-resource areas of colonias make understanding the role of community and household food availability in children's at-home food consumption especially critical. Results of this study will facilitate additional research and the targeting of effective policy and programmatic changes into neighborhood and household settings. The overall goal of this study is to examine complex, place-based factors that may either enable or constrain Mexican-American children from achieving good nutritional health. Building on current food environment projects within the colonias, the proposed project uses retail food store data, including comprehensive assessments of availability, variety, and price of food products in traditional, convenience, and nontraditional food stores from the Colonia Food Environment Project, 2009-10. We also use data from a current cohort study of 50 family dyads (mother-child ages 6-11) recruited from 40 colonias in 20 census block groups in Hidalgo County, TX. Data (survey, household food supplies, and dietary intake of children) were collected by promotores (indigenous community health workers) at three time points. The primary outcome measure is children's dietary intake, using three 24-hour dietary recalls at each time. Analyses will use descriptive statistics and multilevel growth curves.

Does Prenatal WIC Affect Birth Outcomes and School Performance? Examining the Consequences of a Dip in WIC Participation

Sarah Hamersma, University of Florida, and David Figlio, Northwestern University

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) is designed to improve health and welfare in pregnant women and young children. However, the effects of WIC are difficult to estimate due to difficulty in obtaining sufficient data on covariates, small size of the intervention, and selection into WIC participation. We use a unique administrative data set from a key period to generate both new estimates of the effects of prenatal WIC on birth outcomes and the first estimates (to our knowledge) of its effects on school performance. We use the full population of Florida birth records from 1994 through 2002 linked to WIC records statewide and school records in one large county.

Our approach to estimating WIC effects is to exploit exogenous variation in WIC participation created by welfare reform in 1996. Despite unchanged eligibility rules for WIC itself, prenatal WIC participation in Florida fell by over 50 percent during reform, with a full recovery by 1 year post-reform. This recovery suggests that the drop was related not to eligibility, but to a widely experienced gap in information.

The dramatic dip in WIC participation allows us to examine the effects of WIC participation in a way previously unavailable to researchers. Using an arguably exogenous shock to participation that affected a large number of people, we can use instrumental variable techniques to isolate the effects of WIC participation on birth and school outcomes.